The Language of Politics and the Politics of Language: Dialectics of Gender Ideology in Ogba Proverbs

By

Ben-Fred Ohia,
Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
Email: benfredohia911@gmail.com
Phone No: 07062947849, 08135087207, 09078892171.

Abstract

As a social and cultural construct, gender is quintessential of human society as it pervades and defines various aspects of human life and experience. Ogba society is also not immune to this gender construction and categorisation. Ogba society is basically patriarchal in nature. In the gender divide, the society privileges a particular gender category, male and marginalises the other, female. This paper interrogates the reason for the gender divide and advocates a way forward, notwithstanding that Ogba society is essentially patriarchal and that the "father-right basis" takes precedence over the "mother-right basis in various important civil and religious issues". The fact remains that Ogba trace their ancestory to a male progenitor or patriarch, Ogba explains the phallocentric nature of the society. This explains why the patrilineal rather than matrilineal basis is emphasised in Ogba socio-cultural and political engineering and is codified in societal institutions.

Keywords: Language, politics, dialectics, gender-ideology, proverb.

Introduction

The Ogba are a socio-cultural category who lives in the Orashi Region of Rivers State, South-South, Nigeria. In Nigeria's federation of thirty-six states, Ogba nation is found in six states. These are Rivers, Edo, Delta, Lagos and Imo and Ebonyi states. They number in the neighbourhood one to two million. These population figures and territorial spread interrogate the minority status foisted on them as they compete favourably with other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The demographic and oil and gas statistics cum other potentials also make them strategic to the economic and political engineering processes in Nigeria and

should normally enhance their econo-political fortunes. This is because they constitute a beautiful and accruing bride sought after by all as the treasure base of Rivers State that is the treasure base of Nigeria. The Ogba also speak one language, Ogba, four mutually and intelligible dialects. They are renowned for their arts and culture (Ohia 2018, p. 75). These include the *okrosnu* masquerade dance with flamboyant calico traditionally costume, the decorations which are one of the most visible markers of their cultural identity and ontology.

Traditionally an agrarian people, the increasing demands of a (post) modern political economy have made a substantial number to seek career prospects in business, education, the civil and foreign services, the clergy among other allied vocations for self-fulfillment or accomplishment (Ellah 1995, p. 102; Ohia, 2021, p. 302).

Social categories of gender in Ogba society

The reality of the social categories of gender in Ogba society is amply valorised in the repertoire of Ogba proverbs. In the canonical tradition, prejudices and stereotypes are routinely woven around the image of women by the dominant patriarchal order in the society. These prejudices and stereotypes delineate women as a dominated, subordinated, marinalised and oppressed social group that exists on the peripheries of society. In these proverbs, too, women are presented and represented as social outcasts, witches, whores, temptresses, mules, malevolent spirits and very often, as objects - rather than subjects. They are cast as passive stock, static, silent or nameless characters to conform to dominant, male ideological complexes. Conversely, men are represented affirmatively as heroic, active, brave, coherent, noble and larger-than-life characters.

This gendered delineation and role perception is not exclusive to Ogba society. As Okoku-Agyemang (1998) states, it is shaped by "clear ideological agents in Akan folktales too. The literature of Africa is replete with valiant as noble heroes-warriors, emperors and kings like Chaka, Nwindo, Sundiata and Silamaka" (Eileen, 1992, p. 15). Women as a marginal and peripheral category do not have such noble heroic, affirmative and grand character traits to them.

This characterisation feeds on gender polarities and prejudices that decidedly privilege patriarchy and represents womanhood as a subjugated and peripheral

category. It is also part of the phallocantric ideological dominance and epistemic violence against women. And such ideological representations in social and power relations only foster and maintain the ascendancy of dominant male ideologies and epistemologies over women who are marginal others in the social, economic and political structures of Ogba society.

Man's place within patriarchal ideological hegemony continues to saturate and prescribed particular patterns of behavior for women are seen as relative to men. Prohibitive codes and taboos rule their daily lives while men are immune to these practices because of dominant patriarchal ideological imperatives. Within the very cult of sexuality in Ogba society, the woman is a de-privileged category-while polygamy and even extra-marital sexuality is allowed for men by patriarchy. Polyandry and sex outside matrimony by women are abominations.

The Ogba linguistic and signifying codes

The Ogba linguistic and signifying codes associated with sexuality are replete with violence against women. For instance, the sexual act is represented in forceful or violent descriptive lexical items that portray women as passive receptors of male violence during sex. These lexical items in Ogba include: *"oyi"* (a derogatory term that has phonological correspondence of a man's action and not that of woman). *Gynyna,* is the Ogba word for sexual relationship between man and woman which means to pierce as a sharp object. Some lexical items literally represent to superimpose male against female and others play a euphemism for male sexual gratification). For instance, in Ogba as it is in most African tribes, a woman is often referred to *oyne-aknurna-aknurna* which means prostitute but a "womaniser-man" is not called a name. Married woman caught in extra marital affair even with a bachelor is called *oyne-okno* while a married man caught with another man's wife has no bad name attached to him.

It is in response to these sex polarities and gender binarisms represented linguistically that Chimhundu (1995) writing about the shona of Zimbabwe comments: "even everyday language has built-in sex differentials… the total effect is to put the male above the female both physical as during sex and symbolically as in virtually all positions of leadership and authority". Modern signers have continued to project the idealistic image of the woman as the symbol of beauty,

family stability and the moral fibre of the whole nation…. Poets, playwrights and signers alike all portray these women characters that do not conform to sex stereotypes as deviants and then punish them by ridicule, marginalisation, ostracism and sometimes even death (Chimhundu 1995, p. 148).

The repertoire or corpus of Ogba proverbs abound with the stereotype of the nameless and silent woman. This is particularly symbolically significant in a political and ideological sense. First, in Ogba as in many African societies, women are barred from speaking in proverb as it is a masculine language. Women are not permitted to participate in the naming process. This is because in Ogba cosmogonic world, naming is a sacred rite. It is a celebration that unites the living and the ancestral world through music, song and dance.

Behind every name stalks a history that is shared by the society and becomes its communal heritage. The Ogba also believe that name defines the individual who bears it, divines his/her future destiny and proclaims him/her to the world of vast possibilities and impossibilities.

Namelessness women in Ogba proverbs

One Ogba proverb that concretely underscores the heritage of namelessness foisted on the woman in Ogba society is the following: *Agadi nwanayna drna-edna la uhno la ekuru wo ọhnụ wo abọ ka eyna* (literally meaning the old woman that fell down in the public place calls for a public view of her cane basket). The figurative meaning is that an old woman who did not do well allows her secret to be known by sundry.

In pre-colonial, traditional Ogba society, old women were indelibly inscribed within the fabric of society as custodian of certain cults as priestesses, counselors on marriage institutions and to maintain morality among newly married wives in the family. The efficacy of the rites involved an old woman who had reached menopause tying an empty snail shell on the neck of a young woman as a symbol of virginity to shield her from sexual violation by men. The above proverb has its provenance on any of this practice should the woman fail in her duty.

However, the old woman here is nameless. This anonymity erases her distinct personality and effaces her dynamic subjectivity in the discursive contours. She becomes circumscribed within the dominant discourse of patriarchy with its political and ideological resonances. The practice she is a repository of is also a male-erected institution which serves patriarchal interests and merely include her with the ideological strategy of excluding her. Worst still, is the fact even when the man fails in similar duties, the proverb of the nameless old woman is used instead of using a proverb of a nameless old man. It is significant to foreground the fact that the old woman is a constant symbol of female subjugation in Ogba proverbs while the old man is rarely mentioned even when man is dominant in the narrative. Thus, woman becomes a name, but a negative and negating one.

There is also a metaphorical and political context and content to naming processes. This makes naming a veritable site for fierce political and ideological contest. The site of contest is governed by such issues as class, race, ideology, cultural practices especially gender, all of which are strategic to naming processes. Naming, as such, is simultaneously metaphorical and political with a cultural vein coursing through it. The politics and metaphysics of naming assume a theological turn and symbolism when one considers the Biblical Creation accounts in Genesis. These accounts have bold implications not only in Graeco-Roman mythology and traditions but harbour some universal application. According to Genesis, God created everything from "voidness" as nothing else existed. Only His Spirit moved on the face of a vast multitude of waiting waters. God's oral word alone accomplished the creative enterprise in six days. He, however, ordained the special role of naming to Adam, the Crown of Creation whom He fashioned from formless day and endowed with the sole prerogative of naming (Genesis 2:19-20). With this divine ordination, Adam had exclusive preserve over the word and appropriated it for the naming process. He named his milieu with the agency of the word. Thus, whatever, Adam named became itself, assuming its distinctive character, status, integrity and beingness in the order of creation. Through this singular ritual of naming, Adam constituted himself into a surrogate agent in the creative process. His domination of his environment including his wife, Eve and the other creatures was most profoundly expressed and established through the right and rite of naming. The power of naming was conferred by God on Adam but not on Eve, and in naming the animals Adam took dominion over them (Daly

1977, p. 47). She adds: "women will remain powerless until they themselves exercise the power of naming". This implicates the symbolic gender significance of the rite of naming. The gender specificity of language, the primary agency for naming is here boldly underscored. It makes language an exclusive male property which he deploys or mobilises to name his environment including women. This makes language phallocentric signifying the male-centredness of the world and language. "Most contemporary thinkers acknowledge the phallocentric character of reigning unitary languages something attendant on…. The male dominated structures in society present within each class and traversing class as well (Cohen 1983, p. 2). He further states:

> … dominant language reflects and perpetuates a rationalist culture structured on hierarchical binarisms which institute distinction and separation for purposes of exploitation. To name is to claim, classify, objectify, dominate …. As Simone de Beauvoir showed …. It invents otherness, and woman is a culturally constructed other, denied subjectivity, reified and subordinated (Cohen 1983, p. 3).

Language is powerful tool in the society and is used in varied ways to dominate the environment. "The terrain of language is the terrain of power" (Volosinor 1973, p. 106). Language as a sign system is composed of signifiers and signified which operate within and are informed by the dominant ideology. For as Wolft (1993) observes, the "politically dominant sections of society generally dominate ideologically too". Among the Ogba, the dominant political category is patriarchy with its ideological hegemony. This dominance is amply demonstrated in the proverbs that the powerful political group weaves into existence naming woman as marginal.

Even in Ogba ordinary life, gender politics and intense gender warfare are waged in naming processes. There is so much to a name, that very name heaves with political, ideological and cultural significance. "Names are rooted in ontological matrices and have their own narratives of origination and mytho-poetics" with "gender ideals and conflicts". (Traore, 1997, p. 41). A name can, as such, be put to two mutually exclusive and irreconcilably antagonistic ends; domination and liberation. Conscious of the political complexion and ideological flavour of a

name, Wideman (1990, p. vii) talks of "the incantatory use of the word to name… and summon power".

A name can, indeed, be used to expouse a political cause or ideological formation. It can also be deployed to pander to the interests of a class, race, culture, social group, sex or gender. A name can, as such, privilege a particular ideological formation, political assumption or traditional belief and confer on it the legitimacy and authority to dominate other formations. It is in this perspective that Goldberg (1993) observes: "power is exercised epistemologically in the dual process of naming and evaluating. In refusing to name things in the order of thought, existence is recognised or refused, significance is assigned or ignored beings elevated or rendered invisible".

Elimination of women as objects and men as subjects

Equality of male and female genders and sustainable development goals in Nigeria is the yearning of every Nigerian especially the women. One essential reality that emerges from the negotiation of gender in Ogba proverbs is that women are delineated as the other, a peripheral category that exists on the margins of society. This is grandly accomplished through the concrete patterning of women in the proverbs in images that suggest their subordination and subjection to men. This representation portrays women as mere objects while it casts men as subjects. Women, in these masculine proverbs function, not as speaking subjects, but as signs and as ideological means creating political and hierarchical differences.

While women are represented as passive, static, flat or anti-heroic characters, men are portrayed as brave, war-like, heroic, courageous, industrious, energetic and resourceful. While women exist on the peripheries of social life, men occupy the core, dominant and privileged position which patriarchal ideological hegemony provides for them while women lack or are denied a space to survive and thrive; men have ample space within the patriarchal order to enact their lives and dominate subordinate groups. One subtle way male domination is achieved as exemplified by the proverbs is through the appropriation of speaking rites using language which is tempered by patriarchal ideology.

> Varied ways in which language aids the defining, depreciating, and excluding of women … women tend to be defined by their

> relations to men … while men are given autonomous and varied linguistic status… the available and "approved" titles, pronouns, lexicons and labels reflect the fact that women… have been named by other (Thorne et al 1983 p. 9).

This is why Thiele (1992) states: "language is a great facilitator of universalisms. Terms such as "man and mankind" are used as if they were generic when in effect they are genderic. He is assumed to be the all-inclusive pronoun". Most time, the physique of the woman is derived when an Ogba proverb says that a glance at an old woman, it appears that bride price was not paid on her (*ile agadi nwnayhaeyna, o̲di̲ ka o̲ku̲wo̲ wo̲ u̲gwo̲ isi ka*). This derogatory remark is not made about the old man in Ogba proverbs.

In Ogba proverbs, the definition of women has been executed in negative and negating tropes, metaphors and stereotypical images that depreciate and demonise woman. They are witches, seductresses, temptresses, mules or ghouls, whores, vampires, or cannibals, images that represent the barest of instincts associated with nature. These labeling have been deliberately done to conform to male dominant attitudes, values, mores and worldviews. As an ideological strategy, men have used the language they have invented especially proverbial language, to paint glowing images of themselves as the paragons of creation.

One proverb that reinforces and concretises in negative metaphors the stereotypical image of women gravitates to the characterisation of the woman as a horse or mule. *Nwnayna di̲ka anyniyna ewno oyne je agba hni* (meaning: if a horse is well caparisoned but without a rider, knows that it has fallen a man somewhere). The political and ideological warfare immanent in its matrices suggest that the pulchritude or physical refinement of woman is merely seductive and synonymous with deception and evil. The image of the horse is also a metaphoric incision which implies the low intellectual quotient of women like horses or mules and is only fit for labour as beasts of burden.

Through the medium of proverbial language, gender politics and ideology is also constructed in Ogba socio-cultural life. The proverb, *wo̲ knu-ni nwnaogiri nwnayna wo̲ o̲do̲zno ekwa, a wo̲ la o̲tu̲ la wo̲ o̲nu̲* meaning when a promiscuous woman is told

to tie her wrapper in a good manner, she says that men are making advances on her. The wrapper here pejoratively represents female sexuality and the looseness of the woman. What is underscored is not the fashion potentials of the wrapper but the power of the prostitute to corrupt others including newly married wives. Woman is, as such, associated with evil infidelity in marriage.

The unreliability of women and their marginality in Ogba patriarchal ordering of societal patterns of life is also thematised in the proverb, *u̲mu̲ didi bu̲ o̲kpasi̲ wo̲ jou̲o̲ mala wnuyne bu̲ o̲kpasi̲ ochni-u̲lo̲* (meaning, "the kin is the snake's tail, the wife the wall gecko's tail). The synecdoche significance of the tail here resides in the resilience and toughness of the snake's tail representing kinship which is rigidly defined in terms of maleness. This underscores the inviolability or sacrosanctity of kinship among men in the society. Radically antithetical to the wall gecko which is delicate and can be easily severed. Another proverb is similar to this content and context. The proverb, *nwnayna bu̲ okpokro agba, nwnaokno bu okwna* - meaning: woman (wife) is a gourd, man (husband) is an iron-stick. This metaphoric distillation constitutes the woman (wife) in an uncomplimentary perspective as the relationship with her can be easily broken because she is the other while that between kinsmen is eternal. Women are, as such constituted as mere appendage that can be ostrasised easily.

Another proverb delineates women in an affirmative light but inevitably, generates gender politics and institutes ideological power apparati that privilege the male *wnuye anu̲ whnu̲rnu̲ onwu la eyna maka u̲mu̲ nde ka* (meaning, the female animal knows death because of its offspring). This proverb ennoables the female animals with anthropomorphic symbolism which reflects on woman. It demonstrates the dutifulness of the woman, her daring cure, votive devotion and sacrificial disposition to her young ones. But these positive attributes are associated with the negative consequence of death. Because of patriarchal saturation, ideology and politics, men are not included in this proverb as if the children do not bear their names.

Gender hierarchies are also established and reinforced in Ogba proverbs as in the following *Nwna egbu wo̲ anu̲, nnea a do̲ la iri isi anu̲* (when a child does not kill game, his mother does not eat the head). The proverb refers to a brave male child whose

act of courage and hunting skills are supposed to ennoble his mother and bring her honour. Why the head which is bony? Why not the choicest part of the game? Here too, gender rules apply.

Although these proverbs are subject to multiple or variegated hermeneutic strategies, they best negotiate the peripheral status of women in phallic Ogba society. This marginality willed into existence by phallocentric institutional frameworks is meditated by politics and ideology which are delicately intermeshed or inscribed in proverbial language. And because proverbs and pithy, economic, fixed, invariant and most fundamentally socio-culturally rooted, they have the capacity of wearing meanings or significations that are potent especially in a gender political and ideological sense. The corpus of Ogba proverbs sufficiently demonstrates this reality.

Scot (1992) affirms this stating: "language provides a crucial point of entry… for understanding how social relations are conceived…how institutions are organised, how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established". Men possess heroic virtues, courage, integrity and a deep and abiding sense of propriety and faithfulness in their relations with women. Language therefore becomes a site for dominion and suppression through history.

> Historically, women have been excluded from the production of cultural forms, and language is, after all, a cultural form-and a most important one. In fairly crude term, this means that language has been made by men and that they have used it for their own purposes (Spender 1982, p. 52).

Constructing women's silence is, therefore, an ideological imperative in the dynamics and patterns of social and cultural interacting so that patriarchy will assume its status as the undisputed powerful social category. As the supremacy and authority of patriarchy is firmly established, what becomes crystalised is the lack of woman in all ramifications. The construction of feminine silence is one fundamental lack which robs the woman of a viable and virile voice. She becomes unable to negotiate meanings and subvert dominant stereotypical images of her in proverbs distilled by male discourses.

Women also lack the phallus, the symbol of supremacy, authority and creativity. This phallic lack is simultaneously silencing and disabling. One, it denies women the right to appropriate the rites of public discourse. Fundamentally too, it shuts them from the very cult of masculine creative enterprise, which effaces women from the discursive contours. The fundamentality of this reality is underscored by the metaphor of the phallus as the pen. Psychoanalysts like the Austrian, Sigmund Freud and especially the French, Jacques Lacan postulate that the phallus is shaped in the image of the pen. Thus, in an ecriture culture, the male dominates politically, ideologically and linguistically as the owner of the phallus.

The pen is also conceptualised as "a metaphorical penis" which makes the male "a progenitor and an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (Gilbert Gubar, 1979, p. 6). This sexual metaphor privileges men. As the sole possessor of the phallus as a signifier, the signified of discourse also becomes a privileged preserve of masculinity. "When it comes to the phallic signifier, lack is the lesson taught to all subjects. This anxious discovery is managed in Freud's asymmetrical account by placing femininity on the side of lack" (Jacobus 1995, p. 5).

The phallus as signifier in psychoanalytical perspectives is also a producer of meanings. The meanings it generates decidedly empower phallic ideology. On the converse, woman, the social category that lacks the phallic ideal, becomes tyrannised by the dominant meanings, which result from the epistemology of the phallus. The meanings that the phallus produces are resident in language, the resource that it uses in the first place to produce these hegemonic meanings. It is language that distinguishes between the imaginary, the uncharted space before the inscription of the individual into the linguistic codes and the symbolic order, the space where subjectivity is achieved through the use of language.

To situate the argument into proper perspective, Gallop (1981) attempts a distinction between the phallus and the penis. According to her, the penis represents infantile sexuality while the phallus is adult sexuality. "… to distinguish phallus from penis is to separate infantile sexuality from adult sexuality. To distinguish penis from phallus would be to locate some masculinity that does not necessarily obliterate the feminine" (Gallop 1981, p. 245).

The meanings generated by the phallus are generated in a fundamental sense. In Ogba proverbs, these meanings ideologically espouse to a number of fundamental causes that privilege patriarchy. They render women voiceless; they cast them as a marginal category that can only exist on the peripheries of society. They also portray woman, the majority social group as a minority. These phallic meanings also delineate women as mere objects in the narratives while men are represented as subjects.

In the dominant narrative discourse and literary tradition, women have been subsumed as a dominated category. As such any appropriation of expressive rites by women end up being subverted and undermined by the male voice in his monologistic strategies which simply drowns that of the female. This hegemonic male discourse negates self expression by women. Women thus represent themselves in familiar stereotypes and prejudicial images that patriarchy would want them to. This was underscored thus:

> Writing is always a creative act, and is often a self-conscious means of self-representation. Yet women writers work within a literary tradition (phallic tradition) which has tended to depict women as passive objects rather than as the active creator's subjects of their own stories… (Goodman 1992, p. 67).

The representation of women as relative to men and as a subordinated social category is not restricted to proverb in Ogba society. This is well represented in other literary genres. For instance, in Ogba oral poetry with a ritualistic rubric, the male represented as the sun while the female as the moon. In this incantation associated with the ritualistic purging or purification of the infected individual, these words are used: *Anyi bu nwnaokno la owna bu nwna'yna* (meaning sun, male child, moon, female child).

This poetic tradition resonates with gender sensitivities that reinforce the binarism which the society constructs between the two sexes. These astronomical metaphors are symbolically significant as they recast the familiar stereotypical images of the female while affirming the noble and ennobling image of the male. For instance, the sun here represents the brightness associated with daylight. It also suggests grandeur, aggressiveness, warmth and imperial majesty. Moon also

represents gentleness, grace, weakness, meekness and motherliness, attributes thought to be quintessential of womanhood.

In ordinary Ogba life, these gender polarities are enacted. As an agrarian people, the Ogba produce food and cash crops. While women produce food crops, men produce cash crops to boost their economic profile in animal husbandry; women's province is in the control of poultry while the culture allocates responsibility for larger mammals to men.

"… Males are in charge of larger domestic animals… leaving only poultry in the hands of women" and "men go to cities or mines to work as wage labourers while their women folk remain in the farms" (Mazrui 1996, Pp.2-3). Similarly, women "cultivate food crops like yam and maize" while men take charge of cash crops like cocoa, cotton and coffee (Momsen 1996, p.50).

Gender differentiation is also inscribed and interrorised in taboos and their social and cultural practices that marginalise and oppress women. For instance, in Ogba traditional society (even though these practices still endure), it was taboo for wives to eat food on the same table with their husbands and they are forbidden from eating certain part of animal such as gizzards, heart, liver, head, etc as they are solely for men (husbands).

"The idea of female inferiority can be conveyed through taboos… in addition to seriously affecting women's health, such food taboos express a male/female hierarchy. Other taboos surround sexuality and purity (Strobel 1995, Pp. 113-114).

Conclusion

In reading Ogba oral narratives/proverbs, it is clear that the stereotypes and prejudices woven around women as well as the object and peripheral roles allocated to them are meant to serve the dominant patriarchal ideology. Language itself, a resource for the rendition of the narratives, is gendered. Even when women are included, it is ultimately with the ideological strategy to exclude them. Women still exist on the margins of a male dominated Ogba society and its discourse of counter hegemonic proverbial strategies that radically contest and

undermine the political potency and ideological tyranny instituted by the phallic order.

This radical alternative patterning of proverbial discourse is what constitutes the postproverbial by deploying gender hierarchies and binarisms in Ogba proverbs. The postprovabiality of the woman list discourse disorganises and shifts the fixity, invariance and formulaicness of the (proto) proverbial and the patriarchal significations they encode. This deconstruction of patriarchal assumptions in Ogba proverbs by the post proverbialities of women raises the fundamental spectre of the gender question in the corpus of Ogba proverbs. It is this regime of gender difference, exploitation, domination and oppression that the postproverbial unmasks and engages. This alternative epistemological system valorised through proverbial trajectories, it is hoped, will inevitably liberalise and democratise the gender space and callulus and privilege womanhood.

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